

Pitfalls of the SDGs

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Because we have to take the sustainability challenges seriously, I am skeptical about the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a collection of 17 global targets set by the United Nations in 2015. To be clear, I completely agree that the strive for sustainable development is one of the major societal challenges of our times. If we want to ensure good lives for everyone within planetary boundaries, the level of resources used to meet basic needs has to be reduced by a factor of two to six (O'Neill et al. 2018). This can only be realized through radical transitions of unsustainable systems, such as our mobility system, our energy system, our food system. Advocating for 'strong sustainability', we question the existing political power structures and economic models, because major social and environmental problems are rooted in these dominant structures. As such, transitions towards more sustainable systems cannot be taken for granted. A real (as opposed to a rhetorical) politics of sustainability implies hard choices and it is in a political practice that answers will be found (Meadowcroft, 2011).

First of all, we have to acknowledge that most sustainability issues are complex or wicked issues. This means that there is uncertainty regarding the scientific knowledge base on which to solve these problems, and at the same time there is disagreement on norms and values. As such, we are confronted with a discussion about the right scientific facts and about potential solutions (e.g. on GMOs, nuclear power phase-out, road users charges), as well as with a dispute between several actors and coalitions about the world we want to live in, or more specific about the food system we want, the energy system we believe in, the mobility system we need, etc. Secondly, the current regime (so the dominant socio-technical system) benefits from the current situation. Many lock-ins are at play: the winners-losers balance is usually in favor of the so-called powerful elite, and as such, a radical transition does not always seem necessary for them. The regime players will promote their answers, mostly technological solutions.

With this in mind, I believe that the role and impact of the 17 SDGs (and the whole logic behind this model) is modest at best and at worst counterproductive, definitely in a strive towards a real transformation of some important systems. I will put forward 3 broad criticisms, or rather 3 pitfalls.



First of all, the SDGs fit very well in a linear top-down management model which is strange in view of the wickedness of sustainability issues. The SDG approach puts a lot of goals, targets and indicators to the forefront. Hajer and some colleagues (2015) warned for what they call 'cockpit-ism': the illusion that top-down steering by governments and intergovernmental organizations alone can address global problems. And what's more, using the SDGs and the monitoring system organisations can pretend that they are tackling sustainability in a serious way. In reality, we often see a confusion between the ends and the means. For instance, it is not because we add SDG-labels and SDG-icons to the courses and educational programmes of our university, that we strive for a system change within our university. Such actions alone do not foster radical change. On the contrary, they maintain the status-quo.

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But still, even if you are in favor of such linear management models, several problems remain: the SDG model does not have a kind of construction schedule and implementation plan for the 17 SDGs and 169 targets. For instance, how can Belgium translate and implement the target 'Support positive economic, social and environmental links between urban, peri-urban and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning' of SDG11 'Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable'? We don't know the first step that will facilitate the second step, which will facilitate the third step, and so on. How to unravel these broad targets (or better: wishes)? How to organise (deliberative) processes? Who is responsible for what? And what about the data we need to report on progress? We are still lacking adequate data to measure the most important goals.

My second criticism also relates to the status quo position. The SDGs can serve as a lock-in because the goals are developed within UN processes, which are usually unable to challenge prevailing structures of political and economic power. As such, we identify a techno-optimistic view to tackle sustainability problems. And definitely when the time horizon is only 15 years (the SDGs focus on 2030) they will throw money at innovations focusing solely on eco-efficiency. Ideas of technological innovation are also often coupled with assumptions of green growth and trickle-down economics. As a result, Northern or Western countries score very high on the SDG Index developed by prof. Jeffrey Sachs (2017). This is the Top 12: (1) Sweden; (2) Denmark; (3) Finland (4) Norway; (5) Czech Republic; (6) Germany; (7) Austria; (8) Switzerland; (9) Slovenia; (10) France; (11) Japan; and (12) Belgium. All those industrialised and wealthy countries have a high ecological footprint. Given the ecological and social challenges, I am worried about the transition pathways of the UN. More economic growth? More exploitation (of nature and the Global South)? A deep belief in technological fix, ignoring the wicked and political character of sustainability issues?

My third criticism focuses on the flat, broad or general character of the 17 SDGs. One has to search quite hard to find a problem that is not somehow related to one or other SDG. The SDG process is an excellent illustration of how countries, pressure groups and advocacy coalitions fought to get their issues or interests included. So at the end, every perspective is reflected and no perspective is subordinated. When everything is labelled as 'strategic', than there's no strategy. Therefore, it is not surprising that SDGs are not only promoted by some social movements and green NGOs, but they are also embraced in Davos (where the World Economic Forum took place) and by multinationals such as Coca-Cola and Monsanto. The SDGs are not (well) defined. Every goal is still very open, so this leaves space for very soft or weak interpretations of sustainability.

Of course, the development of the SDGs is a success of diplomacy at the highest possible level and it puts an interpretation of sustainability on the agenda which is reasonable and accessible for many actors. So the fact that we all share a collective agenda is definitely a good thing. But as mentioned, there is a danger that the SDGs are used to maintain the status-quo, whether consciously or not. The problem is that we need some real transitions towards a socially just and ecologically sustainable society. Therefore, we can benefit from a meaningful debate about priorities for an integrated system change. And as Keeley and Scoones argue, it is necessary to ask who is being governed by whom and to what ends and with what effects. A 'strong sustainability' debate should not ignore the elephant in the room: our dominant economic model and our systems to measure economic growth. As such, we should reinforce and open-up the discussion using frameworks from ecological economics, the economy of the common good, the degrowth movement and the sharing economy, by bringing in ideas from bottom-up initiatives that also focus on sufficiency, less consumption and the commons, and adding frameworks on new political institutions, new fiscal systems and new deliberative settings. If we really try to implement a transformative agenda, then we will be confronted with the wicked and political character of sustainability issues, as well as with many lock-ins maintained by the current powerful regime. And of course, there will be fewer people with the colourful SDG-pin on their jackets if we are not pretending anymore.

(This opinion is based on my opening remarks during a SDG-debate with Minister Alexander De Croo, Mayor Daniel Termont, Former UN Habitat director Joan Clos and myself. Organisation: Eurocities & the City of Ghent, 4th of June 2018)

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